

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 10, 2013

Agenda Item: Vanisko Ranch Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Preliminary Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

The Vanisko Ranch Conservation Easement would encompass almost 7,100 acres bordering the Beaverhead-Deer Lodge National Forest, southeast of Deer Lodge. The diversity of habitats on the ranch is distinguished by significant riparian components and abundance of native grasslands. In 2012, FWP and the Natural Resource Damage Program designated the area, which is known as the Deer Lodge South landscape, as a top priority. Funding would come from the State of Montana's settlement with Atlantic Richfield Company for damages to the Upper Clark Fork watershed. The high value of the property for conservation is also evidenced by its location within a Tier One Focus Area, as identified by the Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. The ranch provides habitat for most of Montana's big game and multiple nongame wildlife, including 11 species of greatest conservation need. It is adjacent to public lands on three sides and as a result provides important access to USFS and DNRC lands for hunting and other recreation.

The Vanisko Ranch has been the subject of two prior positive endorsements by the Commission—the first in 2008 for placement of a conservation easement on the entirety of the ranch and the second in 2009 for a combination of easement and fee-title acquisition purchase. The Trustees of the Natural Resource Damage Program deferred a decision on the conservation easement in 2008, and ultimately, FWP and the land-owners were unable to come to terms in 2009. The family remains interested a conservation easement on the property; however, if necessary, they will sell the property to a private buyer. Land prices have declined since 2009, which if an easement is secured, should reduce the cost to FWP. FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement on the entirety of the Vanisko Ranch, at appraised value, with a primary funding source (if granted) being the NRDP.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP would release a draft environmental assessment, management plan, and socioeconomic assessment for public review, and hold a public meeting in Deer Lodge, prior to presenting a decision notice to the Commission for final approval.

Alternatives and Analysis

If endorsed, FWP would explore alternatives and obtain public comment. No-action would likely result in further development, affecting conservation values, and the ranch would be closed to the public.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends Commission endorsement to negotiate with the landowners, initiate the public process, and work with the NRDP and other cooperators to secure funding to conserve key habitats and provide public access to a cornerstone ranch in the Deer Lodge area.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission give preliminary approval for FWP to proceed with negotiating the Vanisko Conservation Easement project and to conduct associated public review and analysis.